

Talking about cancer to primary aged children

Introduction

Reassure the class that cancer in children is very rare and no one knows for sure how children and young people get cancer. You cannot catch it and it is nothing you have done or said that caused the cancer (this is especially important for siblings).

Scientists are doing research to find out more. Because of the research done over the last 30 years, 7 out of 10 children who get cancer now survive.

Ask children if they can think of an illness that you can catch from one of their friends? (E.g. colds, flu, chickenpox). Can they think of any illnesses that you can't catch from someone else? (E.g. asthma, broken legs).

What is cancer?

Your body is made up of millions of cells that do different jobs and behave in different ways. Usually cells divide to make new healthy cells. Cancer happens when an unhealthy cell is made and divides and grows faster than the healthy cells.

Without treatment the number of unhealthy cells grow and can spread to other parts of the body too.

Types of cancers

- Cancer cells can group together to form a lump or tumour.
- When the blood cells divide and create unhealthy cancer cells, the type of cancer is called leukaemia or lymphoma

There are over 200 different types of cancer but the most common in children and young people are leukaemia and brain tumours.

Treatment

When a child does have cancer or leukaemia it means that they have to spend quite a lot of time in hospital having special treatments to make them better.

One of the treatments is called chemotherapy, a drug that goes into your bloodstream, attacking the unhealthy cells as it flows around your body. But it can affect the healthy cells too. This can make a child feel tired, sick and cause their hair to fall out. They may also lose a lot of weight or put a lot of weight on.

Another treatment is radiotherapy. This targets high-energy rays at the cancer cells, avoiding the healthy cells. It is not painful, and lasts for a few minutes for each session. It is a bit like having an x-ray.

Sometimes people have one type of treatment, or they can have a mixture, whatever is best to treat the type of cancer they have. It is important to emphasise that even though children might look different they are exactly the same person and will really need their friends to cheer them up. Ask children to think about how they feel when they are ill.

Discussion Points:

- Ask children how they feel when they are ill (frightened, bored, sad) and what helps to cheer them up.
- If you have a child in your class currently receiving treatment, ask children what they think they could do to cheer them up (send a card, make a picture from the whole class, do you have a class mascot that they can have while in hospital?)

- Hospital can be boring and children will miss school and their friends. Ask children how they make a class mate still feel involved in school (send a diary, make a collage from all the children, send in pictures of activities.)

The good news is CLIC Sargent! CLIC Sargent provide lots of help for children with cancer and their families, such as:

CLIC Sargent Nurses - The nurses can go to the child's house or into school and care for the children there, rather than them having to go into hospital so much. This is really good news because, if anyone has ever had to go into hospital, they will know just how boring it can be and it is horrible being away from family and friends.

CLIC Sargent Play Specialists – Play Specialists make staying in hospital a bit more fun. They also help the children understand about all the medicines and things that will be used to help make them better so that they aren't as scared.

CLIC Sargent Social Workers – Social Workers help the whole family understand what is going to happen when they find out their child has cancer. They help the family not to feel so frightened and can even organise surprise treats for children and their families to cheer them up.

CLIC Sargent Family support Workers – When mum and dad have to spend a lot of time at the hospital Family Support Workers help make sure everything at home is ok for other brothers and sisters. They pick them up from school, do cleaning, shopping and organise fun activities.

Homes from Homes - CLIC Sargent also helps mums and dads and brothers and sisters because they know just how much everyone worries when someone they love is ill or in hospital. CLIC Sargent have special houses that families can live in near to the hospitals so they can be close by and visit all the time.

Care Grants - Some families need some extra money to help them get to and from the hospital or to buy special equipment and CLIC Sargent can help with that too.

Holidays – After a long time in hospital or at home receiving treatment, CLIC Sargent know how important it is for families to get together and have a holiday. They have holiday homes by the sea which families can stay in for free but are near hospitals who know all about their treatment, so all they have to think about is having a good time.

You can also purchase 'Why Charlie Brown, Why? A story about what happens when a friend is very ill' (Ravette Publishing) from all good book shops including: www.Amazon.co.uk

For further information, advice and teaching resources on supporting a child at school with cancer or leukaemia please call the Child Cancer Helpline helpline on 0800 197 0068.

www.clicsargent.org.uk

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